When Zombies Appear, Fitness Comes to Life at Maryland Middle School

**Issue:** Is technology the enemy of physical activity and fitness for today’s students — or a valuable tool in getting them to embrace it? Bob Russell, physical education and health teacher at Cockeysville Middle School in Maryland, believes technology, when used properly, may hold the key to changing young people’s exercise behaviors for the better.

Russell, 65, decided to become a PE teacher at age 40 after working for years in heating and air-conditioning and raising five children. “I told my wife I was dissatisfied with my job and wanted to go back to school,” he says. “She was completely supportive and held down the fort for two-and-a-half years while I became a PE teacher. I wanted to be a better teacher than what I had seen.”

**The Big Idea:** When he entered the teaching profession, Russell watched kids in PE classes standing around disengaged, and thought, “I need to change this game.” He spent a total of 13 years at a high school, six of which he was a coordinator for the Sports Science Academy, a magnet program. This program was for students who wanted to pursue sports-related careers. He finally found his niche in middle school, where he taps creativity and technology to modify traditional activities like flag football, orienteering and swing dancing.

“Smartphones are here to stay, so we need to find ways to use them in an educational environment,” the tech-savvy teacher noted in a video presentation for SHAPE America that demonstrated how to control cell phone use, find useful apps, generate QR codes, and create a YouTube channel to enhance fitness teaching.

Russell, a SHAPE America member, points out that smartphone apps, including pedometers, global positioning system (GPS) units, workout videos, performance trackers, physically active games, and other tools, can easily “sneak” fitness into students’ lives.

**Implementation:** Russell had learned orienteering in elementary school and decided to give it a technology upgrade for his middle-schoolers, who now use their smartphones to pinpoint GPS coordinates, and maps and compasses to locate 70 painted markers placed on trees and poles. “They learn navigation, gain cardiovascular conditioning through interval workouts, acquire fitness knowledge, and solve math equations,” he says. “Technology can be extremely useful when it furthers or deepens the students’ learning.” Heart rate monitors show them how their heart functions and how physical activity enhances cardiovascular health.
The idea of creating entertaining and instructional videos came from his oldest son, who works for the Discovery Channel. One of Russell’s more than two dozen videos, which features student “zombies” dancing to Michael Jackson’s “Thriller,” kicks off the much-anticipated Zombie Run at the start of each school year. It’s basically a game of tag, but “when you add the zombie component, students run their tails off,” Russell says.

The “Pokemon a-Go-Go” Unit, which also launched with a fun video, is a large-scale scavenger hunt that sends student teams on a competitive chase to find Pokemon cones. Some cones direct them to perform other fitness activities, like a series of jumping jacks, before they can race off in search of the next one. Students must use their phones to photograph one Pokemon for each team member before time runs out.

The Social Dancing Unit doesn’t rely on technology — just popular music that sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders can’t resist dancing to. Russell says he’s more of a dance promoter than a dance teacher, but his demonstration video shows he knows his way around the dance floor. His students have learned a variety of “old-school” dance styles in a non-competitive setting. “They especially love swing,” he says.

Russell works the National Standards into the fast-paced line dance routines to songs like “Cotton-Eyed Joe,” “Footloose,” and “Uptown Funk.” Middle-schoolers are not typically early risers, but they have no problem showing up for the 7 a.m. Wednesday Dance Club.

**Results:** Cockeysville Middle School’s innovative PE program recently won a Maryland PE Demonstration Award, following a long process of refinement. “Our county PE supervisor suggested we apply for the program six years ago, but we all felt we needed to tighten up on a lot of things that were lacking,” says Russell. “We have improved activities and disciplines that fall under SHAPE America’s National Standards for K-12 Physical Education and discarded those that did not. It was an incredible challenge, but also very rewarding. We are still working and fine-tuning activities to get the best educational results from our students. This will always be an ongoing process.”

Russell would love to see all middle school students receive a heart rate monitor as part of their PE uniform. “Our fourth- and fifth-period eighth-graders wore heart rate monitors for over a month and participated in four weekly eight-minute run/walk assessments,” he says. “Their total laps, percentages of laps, average heart rate, and maximum heart rate were recorded on each run. It proved that by participating in a variety of cardiovascular activities on a consistent basis, they could increase their running distance, as well as possibly lower their average heart rate.”

**Takeaway:** Russell believes that sixth grade is the ideal time to introduce students to new fitness activities. “There are huge changes by seventh grade, and you get rebellion,” he says. He also recommends finding activities you already have equipment for (his entire budget is $3,000), using the technology tools at your disposal, and modifying or inventing games that engage students while meeting the National Standards. Above all, keep tapping into what kids like — and don’t hesitate to rewrite everything as you go along. “What you are teaching today may be different tomorrow, so you must remain flexible,” says Russell.

When you introduce unconventional methods for teaching PE and fitness, it’s also important to have the backing of administration, adds Russell, whose characteristic rule-bending, while liked by students, had met with administrative resistance in a former job. “I don’t think outside the box; I have no box,” he says. “Without a supportive principal who was willing to listen and make it work, this never could have happened.”